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ABSTRACT

Difficulties in transcription from the Hebrew to the Roman alphabet are discussed. The resolution of some of the problems in Judeo-Spanish texts using the "aljamiado" writing system are reviewed, including the use of some Hebrew consonants as vowels, representation of Judeo-Spanish sounds non-existent in Hebrew, and phonetic variations not resolved by context. Difficulties encountered in the transcription of aljamiado texts into the Roman alphabet are then examined. These difficulties include the lack of an accepted standardized system for transcription, representation of stress, adjusting the transcription to serve different purposes, such as historical study vs. accessibility to lay readers, and the legitimacy of transliteration. Six specific suggestions for transcription are made, and 3 transcriptions of the same text by different people are appended. The transcriptions are done by individuals whose native languages are Spanish, Judeo-Spanish, and English. (MSE)

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Suggestions on the Transcription of Sephardic Texts into the Roman Alphabet

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While there are many Judeo-Spanish texts available for study --both in manuscript and in print--, the majority of them are written in aljamiado; that is, in Judeo-Spanish, but using the Hebrew alphabet. This factor makes them considerably less accessible than they might otherwise be, since many of the scholars who work with Spanish do not know the Hebrew alphabet. The obvious solution is to transcribe these texts into the Roman alphabet, and, indeed, some transcription has been done.[1] Those transcriptions often appear as articles in periodicals such as the American Sephardi, Sefarad and the Jewish Language Review. But the very process of transcription brings forth another series of problems.

The Hebrew alphabet consists of consonants only; vowels are diacritics--dots and dashes--which may appear above or below the letters, or sometimes in the middle of the writing line. Too, Judeo-Spanish contains some sounds which do not exist in Hebrew--or, in some cases, in modern Spanish. The aljamiado writing system, which developed in the Middle Ages in Spain, solved these problems to some degree, generally on an ad hoc basis, but the

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[1]Moshe Lazar of the University of Southern California has recently published a transcription of the Ladino Bible of the sixteenth century; Isaac Jack Levy of the University of South Carolina has transcribed La ermoza Rahel; I recently directed an M.A. thesis (presented in May 88 at the University of Northern Iowa by Andrea Liu) called "Dos romansos sefardies: transcripción y traducción," which includes two novelettes of the early years of this century which were published in aljamiado in Smyrna--Venganza de muerta (1901) and Amor de salvajes (1907).

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solutions were not formalized until later, with the founding of printing houses in the Ottoman Empire after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain.

Some of the Hebrew consonants were pressed into service as vowels: the yod was used to represent the front vowels /e/ and /i/; the vav stood for the back vowels /o/ and /u/. The /a/ is represented by the Hebrew aleph, once a guttural but now silent in Hebrew. Between two other vowels, aleph denotes a hiatus. Final /-a/, most often the sign of feminine gender in nouns and adjectives, is represented not by the aleph, but rather by the letter hay (which is the sign of feminine gender in Hebrew). Words which begin with vowel sounds other than /a-/ in Judeo-Spanish are generally written with an initial aleph which, in these cases, has no sound value.

While there is no problem in recognizing /a/ in an aljamiado text, the word discurso could equally well be pronounced descurso, descorso, descorsu, discorso, discorsu if read by someone who knows aljamiado but has never seen or heard this particular word before. I suspect that one of the morphological curiosities of Judeo-Spanish preterite forms is due precisely to this kind of sound confusion with the contributing factor of analogy.

First-person singular preterite forms in Spanish end in -e for first-conjugation verbs, but in -i for second- and third-conjugation verbs, and the strong preterites end in unstressed -e. All of those sounds are represented by a final yod in aljamiado. Consequently, just as we have entendí and viví in Spanish, we also find posí (from posar, which should give pose) in Judeo-Spanish.

Because of the writing system, we cannot tell if that pronunciation was current among Spanish Jews during the fifteenth century, or if it developed after the expulsion, among subsequent generations who did not have contact with the spoken language of Spain.

One case in which aljamiado helps with pronunciation is that of the initial h- in Spanish. The change of initial Latin f- to aspirated, and then unaspirated, h- is a peculiarity of Castilian, so that Latin *fabulare became first /hablar/ and later the modern Spanish /ablar/. That change was in process at the end of the fifteenth century, when the Jews were expelled. In some areas it had been completed, in others it had not yet begun. Perhaps this is why the word for 'son' in Salonica is fijo while it is ijo in Istanbul. But for texts of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century written in the Roman alphabet, we cannot always be sure that the f- represented a labiodental sound, nor can we rely on an initial h- to be silent. Aljamiado, on the other hand, is an attempt at phonetic representation of the language and, because of the use of a different alphabet, there is no tie to traditional Latin spellings. If the word was pronounced /ijo/, the initial letter is generally an aleph, but if the h was aspirated, the word begins with the letter hay. I have, in fact, found a fragment of a letter which has both hijo and hermana with initial hay, but have not yet been able to date or place it.

The other problem mentioned is that of representing sounds of Judeo-Spanish which do not exist in Hebrew; e.g., /j/, /zh/, /ch/. That is handled in aljamiado by the use of a tick, called a rafe,

above certain consonants. Gimel, for example, which is normally pronounced as a hard /g/, with the rafe becomes /ch/ or /j/. Bet, generally the bilabial /b/, becomes a labiodental /v/ with a rafe. But the people who wrote the language knew how the words were pronounced, as did those to whom the various documents were addressed, so that it was not necessary to take great care in the use of the rafé. As is the case with the accent mark in modern Spanish, native speakers sometimes leave it out where it ought to appear, and other times they put it where it doesn't belong. It won't really make any essential difference to the intelligibility of the document because both the writer and the reader know the words in question, and know how they are pronounced. Thus, the phonetic representation of Judeo-Spanish is often unreliable.

We can sometimes, by careful examination of a document, tell if a bet should have had a rafé or not, when the word occasionally appears with a vav (which, although usually a vowel in aljamiado, represents the labiodental /v/ in Hebrew). The Valladolid Taqqanot 'Laws' of 1432, for example, regularly use the vav as the initial sound for the city of Badajoz, so that we know that Castilian Jews of the early fifteenth century pronounced it as /v/ rather than /b/. And since we know that there is no word mugos, but rather muchos, we can tell that the medial gimel should have been written with a rafé even when it does not appear in a given manuscript or printed text.

But the Hebrew alphabet adds still another complication to Judeo-Spanish. There are two letters to represent the sound /s/: the samekh and the sin/shin. The latter may also stand for

palatal /sh/, and is theoretically written with a rafe when it has that phonetic value. I say "theoretically" because, in practice, that rafé very seldom appears. In those documents which I have examined, the sin is much more common than samekh for the -s which marks the plural of nouns and adjectives, or the second-person singular of verbs. Yet the difference between /s/ and /sh/ is the difference in Judeo-Spanish between second-person singular and second-person plural. More often than not, context resolves the problem, but that isn't always true.

Now that we've considered some of the problems which can crop up in reading aljamiado texts, we are ready to look at difficulties in the transcription of those texts into the Roman alphabet. At present, there is no accepted standardized system for such transcription. If the trascriber is someone whose native language is English, /sh/ will appear as sh, but if that person's native language is French, it will be ch. And what if the transcriber's language is Turkish? Then the same sound will appear as s with cedilla.

How are we to handle the problem of stress, which is semantically significant in words like avlo 'I am speaking' and avlí 'he spoke'? Aljamiado doesn't use accent marks, nor does English. But Spanish does. Are we somehow making a transcription less authentic if we use them to indicate stress in such situations? Aljamiado distinguishes between vio 'he saw' and the second syllable of navio 'ship' by the use of an aleph to indicate hiatus between the i and the o; Spanish uses an accent mark over the i of navio for the same purpose. Perhaps we ought to adopt

the solution suggested by Isaac Jack Levy; that is, use accent marks when the stress is semantically significant, and use i-o to indicate hiatus between the two vowels, with y-o representing a diphthong. In that case, we would write v-y-o for 'he saw', but n-a-v-i-o for 'ship'. Avlo would appear without an accent mark, while avló would have one.

To further complicate matters, there are different purposes that transcription serves. One is its use for relatively modern Judeo-Spanish texts, such as the romansos or novelettes that were popular at the beginning of this century; but there are also documents of historical value which date back several centuries. In his transcription of the sixteenth-century Ladino Bible, Mosne Lazar's purpose is to make the text available to the majority of readers, in as authentic language as possible. He, therefore, follows the spelling norms of sixteenth-century Spanish. It is quite a different task to make available to interested readers text which was written in this century. Do both purposes necessarily demand the same solutions?

To what extent is it legitimate to include transliteration--the one-for-one representation of Hebrew characters by Roman ones--in the transcription of a text? Is it necessary to indicate if a given /s/ appears as a sin or a samekh, or if it was a bet plus rafé or a vav that marked the sound /v/ in the aljamiado text? Perhaps if we are dealing with a text whose transcription is being done for linguistic purposes, and whose intended readers are, themselves, linguists, those distinctions should be made. But are they really significant enough to be indicated in most cases? We

may simply be dealing with a case where the printer was running short of sin and so used samekh, since it represented essentially the same sound. Or were there two different s sounds? Perhaps, in the case of manuscript texts, we are dealing with a scribe's writing dictation without having the time to check for spelling consistency; he would simply put down a letter which represented the desired sound, and it is much quicker to write a vav, a straight line, than a bet, which has curves, plus a re[illegible]. We do not, after all, want to "create a new phonetic reality," to use Moshe Lazar's words, which did not exist historically.

The Instituto Benito Arias Montano in Madrid, which publishes Sefarad, uses a system which is quite complicated. There are cases where two or three different symbols represent the same sound, and many diacritics appear--acute, grave and circumflex accents, upside-down circumflex accents and dots above or beneath some consonants. While the result is as accurate as possible a representation of the original, the system is essentially a barrier to any reader who is not a linguist. The problem is that the system attempts to represent both the writing and pronunciation of the words--that is, it tries to integrate transcription and transliteration to a great extent.

The appendix illustrates various approaches to transcription. It gives transcriptions which were done for the panel discussion at the AATSP meeting last August by three different people, all of part of an article in the New York Sephardic paper, La Vara, which ceased operation in the 40s. Transcription A was done by someone whose native language is

Spanish; B, by someone who speaks Judeo-Spanish as a native language; and C, by me, a native speaker of English.

Transcription A, as you will notice, is modern Spanish as regards spelling and accentuation, with differences basically in vocabulary, to reflect words in American Judeo-Spanish such as transferar, groceria, cualunque, and spelling that reflects English in 'Street', Downtown'.

Transcription B, done by a native speaker of Judeo-Spanish, reflects his dialect's pronunciation in words like di, divino, artikolo. It also shows the difference between the voiced and unvoiced s, with words such as groseria and presios versus satisfazer, kezo. We also see here the form reduzidos, which appears in the original, but which in Transcription A became the Spanish reducidos. While the hard c is generally represented here by the letter k, cualunke shows a lack of consistency.

In Transcription C, I attempted to be consistent, and thus did not use the letter c at all: k represents the hard sound, and s, the sibilant. I used the y for the semivowel, and i for the vowel. However, since I do not speak Judeo-Spanish, when there was a choice between e and i, or o and u, I chose the vowel which is used in modern Spanish. I notice now that the word for 'and', following this system, should be written as the letter i, but the influence of modern Spanish caused the y to appear as the next-to-last word of the first line of the text. Kualonke owes the o to the ending of the Judeo-Spanish form cualo. Also, in order to avoid the confusion of representing the /sh/ sound, i

went back to Old Spanish and used the letter x for that sound, as in kaxkaval.

Does this difference in the transcription of a two-sentence paragraph of modern Judeo-Spanish indicate some of the difficulties involved? Do we want to make the transcription look like Spanish, as in A, or do we want it to look like basically another language, perhaps a dialect of Spanish?

My suggestions on transcription, then, are:

1. Use i when the vowel has its own syllabic value, but y for the semivowel;
2. Eliminate the letter c, which has more than one phonetic value, replacing it with k and s;
3. Use x for the /sh/ sound;
4. Use the accent mark only where needed for semantic significance;
5. Transcribe the text faithfully, without attempting to make it resemble modern Spanish;
6. Let the transcription system be reflected in all future publications dealing with such documents.

It is, of course, the last point which is the most critical. If this system--or any other--is ultimately adopted, either formally or by "gentlepersons' agreement," that system should then be reflected in all future publications, whether they are done in this country, in Argentina, in Spain or in Israel.

גרוסידיאה מודידנה

ליאון יחזקיל, פרופריאטאריו

איל ב"ייני די טראנספ"יראר סו סטור
איל 97 סטינטון סטריט, אי דיב"ינו לה מיז"ור
אי מודידנה גרוסידיאה אין דאון טאאון,
סיינדו איל קליאינטי פואידי אינקונטראר קוא-
לזנקי ארטיקולו אי אה פרסיוס ביין רידואי-
זידוס. איל סינייור ליאון יחזקיל פור סאטיס-
פ"אזיר סו קליאינטילה ב"ייני די אימפורטאר
די סאלוניקו אב"אס סיקאס, קאשקאב"אל, קי-
זו אי אוטרוס ארטוקולוס.

A: TRANSCRIPTION BY NATIVE SPEAKER OF SPANISH

GROCERÍA MODERNA
LEON IJZAKIL, PROPIETARIO

EL VIENE DE TRANSFERAR SU STORE AL 97 STENTON STREET, Y DEVINO LA MEJOR Y MODERNA GROCERÍA EN DOWNTOWN, SIENDO EL CLIENTE PUEDE ENCONTRAR CUALUNQUE ARTÍCULO Y A PRECIOS BIEN REDUCIDOS. EL SEÑOR LEON IJZAKIL POR SATISFACER SU CLIENTELA VIENE DE IMPORTAR DE SALÓNICO HABAS SECAS, CASHCABAL, QUESO Y OTROS ARTÍCULOS.

B: TRANSCRIPTION BY NATIVE SPEAKER OF JUDEO-SPANISH

GROSERIA MODERNA
LEON IHZKEL, PROPIETARIO

EL VIENE DI TRANSFERAR SU STOR EL 97 STENTON STRIT, I DIVINO LA MEJOR I MODERNA GROSERIA EN DAUN TAUN, SIENDO EL KLIENTE PUEDE ENKONTRAR CUALUNKE ARTIKOLO I A PRESIOS BIEN REDUIZIDOS. EL SENYOR LEON IHZKEL POR SATISFAZER SU KLIENTELA VIENE DE IMPORTAR DI SALONIKO AVAS SEKAS, KASHKAVAL, KEZO I OTROS ARTIKOLOS.

C: TRANSCRIPTION BY NATIVE SPEAKER OF ENGLISH

GROSERIA MODERNA
LEON EHEZKIL, PROPIETARIO

EL VYENE DE TRANSFERAR SU STOR EL 97 STENTON STRIT, Y DEVINO LA MEJOR Y MODERNA GROSERIA EN DAUN TAUN, SYENDO EL KLIENTE PUEDE ENKONTRAR KUALONKE ARTICULO Y A PRESYOS BYEN REDUIZIDOS. EL SENYOR LEON EHEZIL POR SATISFAZER SU KLIENTELA VYENE DE IMPORTAR DE SALONIKO AVAS SEKAS, KAXKAVAL, KEZO Y OTROS ARTICULOS.